



Experiencing Integration: From Cairo to Stockholm

A Reflection on Integration from Refugees in Towns
Stockholm, Sweden

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Cover photo: The Värmdö neighborhood of Stockholm depicting houses for refugees isolated from the wider community in Gustavsberg. Photo by author.

From Eritrea to Egypt to Sweden

Long ago, my father was a part of the Eritrean Independent Army during the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. After the war ended, my father worked as a teacher. In 1998, my father was detained with a group of his fellow teachers as part of a wide government crackdown on educators. I was only two years old at the time, so I never really had the chance to know him, as he was in prison for almost my entire childhood. A few years after he was imprisoned, my family left Eritrea. Many years later, a family friend who used to work for the government contacted my family that remained in Eritrea and told them that my father was still alive, which gave us hope we could see him. I had dreamt of that day my entire life.

However, it turned out that my father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's in prison. When we heard this, it felt as if someone had told us that tomorrow was Christmas and showed us all the presents under the tree but informed us we would never be able to open our presents and play with them. Eventually, I learned to accept that my father would not remember me, but I still hoped to meet him upon his release from prison. I had learned almost everything that I know about my father from my mother and my close cousins, and it was difficult to accept the fact that I never had the chance to know my father and had to learn about him through stories.

All this was occurring as my family and I still lived in Cairo. A few years after receiving the news of my father's diagnosis, my family and I moved to Sweden through the UNHCR resettlement process. Two or three days after we moved, we received news that my father was released, and for the first time I was able to see a contemporary photo of him, the only photo I have of him. Immediately, I started to make plans to find a way to see him. However, I have found that in my life, the happy moments I experience are coupled with the bad moments, so that the happiness only lasts for a few hours.

Only hours after we heard my father was released, my cousin called my family and told us my aunt had passed away. My family was upset, especially as we were now much further away from our relatives. It was very sad, but the worst was still to come. Soon after, we received another phone call. We assumed it was about my aunt, but our relatives told us my father had also passed away. Even now, I cannot explain the way I felt during that moment other than that my dreams had died. I was destroyed, and for the first time I saw my mother, a very strong woman who I admire, crying. This was how our new life in Stockholm started, and this experience greatly influenced the way we had to adapt to life here.

In this report I will share my experiences and the experiences of other refugees who are attempting to integrate to Stockholm and Cairo (for more on refugees in Cairo, see our RIT report, [here](#)). Although the "West" is usually portrayed as an idealized destination for refugees, I found that both cities have their challenges. In some ways—like accessing affordable housing and making friends—life in Cairo was easier. In other ways though—like personal safety and experiences with racism—life in Stockholm has been better. Ultimately, I found the support for refugees lacking from both the municipal governments and NGOs in both cities.

The Author's Position and Experiences in Stockholm and Cairo

I arrived in Stockholm nearly two years ago. Before that, I lived in Cairo for six years after my family and I left Eritrea. In both cities, I have helped refugees navigate their new surrounding and have had many opportunities to examine the different services provided for refugees in the two cities. It is not my intention to claim that all refugees experience what I have, but I try to share my personal story, and the stories from some of my friends in Stockholm and Cairo to try to paint a picture of integration in these cities.

Life in Stockholm

Housing

Even with the tremendous loss we experienced upon arriving here, moving to Sweden has been a great opportunity for me and my family. That said, the experience has presented many challenges to us. For many refugees, my family included, finding housing in Stockholm causes the most stress of all of life's daily demands. I came to Sweden a year and six months ago, and housing has been stressful since the first day. When refugees arrive in Stockholm, the government gives them two years to find independent housing. If they fail to do so, they are kicked out of their government provided accommodations in the city to cheaper ones in the north of the country. However, it is difficult to rent a house in Stockholm because it is so expensive, and jobs are hard to find here. Many refugees stress about being forced to move to northern Sweden because there are fewer job opportunities and worse schools. One friend I talked to said they feel hopeless about the housing situation, while another told me they were happy to leave Stockholm to find better housing. As a result of these troubles, refugees in Stockholm focus much of their energy on finding suitable housing and less time worrying about other essential things.

In addition, I have found that the government services provided to refugees are lacking. Many of us feel that the government does not really know we exist here and does not want to assist us. When we arrived in Stockholm, we were assigned a government caseworker who was supposed to help us settle. Instead, I have felt that my caseworker has been pushing me to leave the area I settled in. Many of my friends have told me that they feel their caseworkers do not want us to stay in Stockholm and would

rather us move anywhere but here. Our living situation in Värmdö, the neighborhood my family and I live in on the outskirts of Stockholm, is like an urban refugee camp, situated in temporary apartments for construction workers. The government told us these were temporary places for us to live as they found us better housing in the city, but they have not found us any.

Services

This lack of welcome from the government extends to other parts of the integration experience, not just housing. For example, because there are no non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide any services for newly arrived refugees in Stockholm, the government caseworkers are our only point of contact for integration services. For example, if you need any information you must ask your caseworker, but many refugees have told me they do not even have a caseworker, and as I have mentioned before, those that do have caseworkers find them lacking. As one 29-year-old male Sudanese refugee said: “The authorities here, I feel they hate me, and especially my caseworker. Whenever I ask him to help me with something, he will do the opposite and make my life even more difficult.”

In addition, many of us are unaware of Swedish refugee laws. For example, many refugees don't know that if they have family members who are not in Sweden with them, they have only the first three months to ask for family reunification. My neighbor has a wife and children in a refugee camp in Ethiopia and wanted to reunite with them. However, he didn't inform the Swedish government of this in the first three months and now they have to wait in the camp until he gets a high paying job so that he can prove to the government that he can support them. These laws are supposed to be covered in an introduction briefing for resettled refugees provided by the Swedish government, but these classes did not cover many critical questions, and instead focused on basic information most of us already knew. In addition, this class was supposed to be held in the first two weeks of arrival, but in my case was held six months after I arrived.

As a result, many refugees must deal with all their problems by themselves. The last time I went to ask my caseworker for help was over a year ago, because I feel like it's pointless. For example, I asked my caseworker to provide me with a computer so I could help other new arrivals learn how to use them. The caseworker replied to me and asked me to contact them again in a week. I replied to them after a week and am still awaiting a response months later. These lackluster responses by caseworkers here are very frustrating for me because I have experience working as a caseworker in Cairo, and I feel like the Swedish caseworkers could be doing a much better job.

Education

One service the local government does provide in Värmdö is called the “språk café,” which is a class that helps you learn Swedish. Some refugees appreciate this service, but it is often hard to access because of their locations in the city. “I like the Språk cafe and it helps me a lot, but the place where I attend is not close to my home,” said a 20-year-old male resettled refugee from Eritrea.

However, many refugees do not trust these cafes because they feel like their real purpose is to spy on us to see if we've found work opportunities yet. All of my friends I talked to were suspicious of this service because all the questions the teachers ask are very personal and not helpful for learning the language. "I don't like språk café... I used to attend it, but I don't trust them anymore because the questions were too much personal," said a 29-year-old male resettled refugee from Sudan.

This points to the lack of trust between the refugees in Stockholm and the government that is supposed to be supporting them. Many refugees I talked to reported feeling that the government was actively working against them. "I have never been to the språk cafe since day one. I was not interested in it...I want some privacy," said a 31-year-old female resettled refugee from Eritrea. In addition, most refugees feel that these Swedish classes are not a good use of their time. Most of us communicate with each other in English or Arabic, and I even communicate with other Swedes in English because they do not think my Swedish is good enough to communicate with them, so I'm not given the opportunity to practice Swedish in daily conversations.

Six months after I arrived, I received a letter to join the social orientation class. However, the quality of the classes was so poor that many of us felt the government was wasting their resources and our time. My mom and I attended the same course together, which did not make sense to me. My mom needed extra assistance, which I provided to her. For example, my mom struggled to understand the purpose of basic things like political parties, whereas I had questions for the teacher about transferring university credits. After a while, my mom said she no longer wanted to attend classes because they were not useful to her. My mom's experience in these classes was not unique to her. The knowledge levels of the refugees in these classes varied wildly, which made it difficult for anyone in those classes to learn anything. I cannot remember a single thing of value these classes taught us. For example, they instructed us on arcane facts of Swedish history, when it would have been more valuable for us to learn about the local laws and procedures.

Prejudices

I have had many difficult interactions with the locals here. They are silent towards me, and I feel there is a wall between us. I have encountered many racist attitudes, especially on public transportation. People have assumed that when there is trash on the bus, I was responsible for it. As well, people have assumed that I have drugs on me because of my skin color. I live near a school, and many of students there hurl racist insults towards me.

I am not the only one who has encountered these issues, and many refugees have had worse experiences than me. Since I moved here, a black teenager was murdered, but the authorities ruled it a suicide. Another female Muslim teenager was slapped by a Swede because she wore a hijab. However, one interviewee reported that they do not experience any racism in their neighborhood of Stockholm.

Though many of my interactions with hosts have been negative, I have had some good experiences with Swedish people. Once my friend had kidney stones and experienced such a strong pain that he was unable to walk. He called me and my brother because he knew we were close by in my sister's

house and could help. When we arrived, we found three Swedish people helping him and had already called for an ambulance. Though I have found many Swedish people suspicious of refugees, it was still heartening to see them help one in need.

Life in Cairo

Housing

Life in Cairo was difficult even though I had a UNHCR card and residency permit. The police never recognized my official residency, and most of the time I had to explain to them my legal status. For example, when I lived in Cairo my friends and I went on a trip outside the city when police officers stopped us and asked for our documents. I gave one my UNHCR card and the officer told me to give him another document because he didn't recognize it. I explained the significance of the card to him, and after six hours they released us. Just like in Stockholm, in Cairo it was difficult and stressful to find housing, but I had a much larger network and I could have moved to any of my friends' places if I needed to. In Cairo, it felt as if refugees looked after each other much more than in Stockholm.

Services

Though I preferred my situation in Cairo, it was not perfect. I felt that UNHCR could have provided better assistance to refugees. Even though they were supposed to provide many essential services to us, it felt as if they didn't actually do anything. For example, UNHCR would refer you to Caritas for medical services, but Caritas was not prepared to deal with the amount of people UNHCR referred to them. Caritas also required you to have a residency permit to receive services, and not all refugees had one. While UNHCR did not do a great job of assisting refugees, there were many other organizations in the city who did provide services. Caseworkers for these smaller organizations would contact refugees and help them to find housing, medical services, psychological services, schooling opportunities, and legal aid, even though they had a small operating budget compared to UNHCR or Caritas.

Education

After I arrived in Egypt, I tried to register myself for school but had much difficulty. The Ministry of Education asked me to bring a certificate from the Eritrean authorities to allow me to take a placement test, though they knew I had fled from those same authorities. One day my mom met a Sudanese lady who said she would help me register for school. When we went to the school, they asked for 10,000 Egyptian pounds. I told the director of the school that "if I had that money, I would rather take a boat to Europe," and as a result of this experience, I did not continue to seek a formal education in Cairo. Instead, I taught myself English by watching English language movies and MTV.

Many refugees have had a similar experience when they seek education in Egypt. The government allows them to get an education theoretically, but they make it difficult to actually do so in practice.

Those that do go to the governmental schools face racism by the teachers and the students. As a result, refugees would rather go to a community school where all the students and teachers are refugees. However, when I lived there, the Egyptian government closed all community schools and threatened to arrest anyone who reopened them, without providing any justification. They never provided education for students who did not speak Arabic. This situation demonstrated the unfriendly welcome refugees received from the Egyptian government.

Prejudices

Living in Egypt as a person with dark skin is dangerous. Egyptians will harass and insult you if you don't speak Egyptian Arabic. However, my Arabic was very good, so I usually avoided harassment. When the police would approach me, I would tell them I was Sudanese or from Saudi to get them off my back. I could not say that I am from Eritrea because the average Egyptian did not know anything about Eritrea, and this ignorance would cause me a lot of issues. However, there are some locals who help refugees. For example, a Sudanese family friend's daughter got sick, but they had no money to get medical assistance. They contacted my family and asked if they could come and stay with us. We took them to an Egyptian doctor, who said that she needed to have surgery that would cost 30,000 Egyptian pounds.

The next day we went to the doctor without the family and explained to him that they had no money to pay and were staying with us. The doctor told us just to pay for the surgery room, which was not much, and he would cover the other costs. This story is one of many from my time in Cairo that demonstrates that while the Egyptian government was not very accommodating to refugees, many individuals were.

Conclusion

Life has been difficult in both Stockholm and Cairo, with my experiences there containing pros and cons. My experiences as a refugee in two very different cultures have given me perspective on the challenges many refugees face in integrating to new environments. I have found that learning the local language and attempting to understand the new culture have been useful to integrate. However, I have found that in both situations, my position as a refugee is less than ideal. In Stockholm, I have found that refugees are unwanted and oftentimes ignored by both the locals and the government. I found it to be similar in Cairo, though I personally had an easier time fitting in because of my proficiency with Egyptian Arabic. However, I have not really kept in touch with my friends in Cairo, nor have I had any desire to return there. Some of my family members perceive my family to be well-off because we live in Sweden and ask for money, but we have no money and only sent money once to Eritrea for an emergency. I think my experiences in both cities are emblematic of the refugee experience and point to the difficulties we face no matter where we settle.

About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author

Ahmed was born and raised in Keren, Eritrea, and escaped to Sudan, and then Egypt. In Egypt he worked with Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) as a Teaching Assistance for unaccompanied youth refugees; and as an Interpreter and Program Assistant for the Refugee Legal Aid Program (RLAP). He was resettled from Egypt to Sweden in 2018 through UNHCR, and currently works as an Interpreter with the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP).

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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